On the media construction of international disasters[1]

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Media - internationale rampen - nieuwsselectie - representatie - vertekeningen
Médias - catastrophes internationales - sélection journalistique - représentation - partialités
Media - international disasters - news selection - representation - bias

De media(de)constructie van internationale rampen

Voor de gemiddelde Westerling zijn rampen zogenaamd *distant suffering*: lijden waar men geen directe getuige van is en weinig tot geen affiniteit of emotionele betrokkenheid mee heeft. In die zin dichten verschillende auteurs een essentiële rol toe aan nieuwsmedia die de belangrijkste en vaak ook de enige bron zijn van informatie over internationale rampen, in zoverre zelfs dat men kan stellen dat een ramp in essentie een mediaconstructie is. Voor velen bestaat een ramp met andere woorden pas wanneer deze door nieuwsmedia opgepikt wordt en als dusdanig erkend of geconstrueerd wordt. Deze paper gaat dieper in op deze conceptualisering van een ramp waarbij we aandacht besteden aan het inherent selectieve karakter van de nieuwsberichtgeving, de beeldvorming van dit buitenlands lijden in Vlaamse nieuwsmedia en de mogelijke implicaties daarvan op een breder maatschappelijk vlak.

La couverture médiatique des catastrophes internationales

Pour la plupart des Occidentaux les catastrophes sont considérées comme *distant suffering*: la souffrance dont on est pas témoins directs et dont on n'a peu ou pas d'affinité ou d'implication émotionnelle. En ce sens que plusieurs auteurs donnent un rôle essentiel aux médias en tant que principale, et souvent seule, source d'information sur les catastrophes internationales, on peut même dire que la catastrophe est par essence une construction médiatique. Pour beaucoup, en d'autres termes, une catastrophe n'existe seulement que lorsqu'elle est reprise et construite comme telle par les médias. Cette contribution approfondit la conceptualisation d'une catastrophe et particulièrement la nature intrinsèquement sélective de la couverture médiatique, l'imagerie de cette souffrance étrangère dans les médias flamands et plus largement ses conséquences possibles au niveau social.

On the media construction of international disasters

For most people living in western countries, disasters are *a priori* cases of distant suffering as they mainly affect cultural or ethnic others. News media thus play a pivotal role in giving publicity and meaning to the numerous instances of global suffering as it is essentially through media reports that the (western) world witnesses international disasters. Accordingly, several scholars define a disaster as a media construction; they exist only when recognized and covered by the media. This paper focuses on the conceptualization of a disaster as a media construction by exploring the inherently selective nature of news coverage, the representation of suffering in Flemish news media and the possible societal implications.

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1. Introduction

In his seminal work 'Risk society: Towards a new modernity' (1992), sociologist Ulrich Beck assessed our contemporary modern society as increasingly preoccupied with invisible, unpredictable and uncontrollable risks such as terrorism, economic crises and disasters. These risk situations are "global in their nature, scope, and potential impacts" (Cottle 2009, p. 351) and, in the case of natural disasters, appear to have increased in frequency and intensity over the last decades (Guha-Sapir et al. 2004, p. 13). Each year, disasters cause severe damage and human suffering around the globe. Between 2002 and 2011, on the average 394 natural disasters occurred each year with an annual average of 107.000 people killed and more than 268 million others who were directly affected. In terms of economic damage, the worldwide losses from natural disasters were estimated at 143 billion US $ in 2012. To put these numbers in some geographical perspective, Europe accounted for 14% of all disasters over the last decade while 58% took place in Asia and Africa. However, the contrast is even sharper when the number of victims are taken into account. Between 2002 and 2011, only 0,25% of the reported victims worldwide were living in Europe. Asia and Africa both represented 96,5% (Guha-Sapir et al. 2013). Therefore, it is fair to state that for most people living in the so-called developed world, disasters but also other events of collective human suffering are *a priori* distant suffering (Boltanski 1999). Consequently, when a foreign country undergoes severe damage and loss of lives that the cause of it can be defined as a disaster, most Western spectators receive this information not first-handed or by personal experience, but through the media.

This contribution concerns the particular subject of mediated suffering with a focus on the news coverage of international disasters. News media play a pivotal role in giving publicity and meaning to these numerous instances of global suffering. Accordingly, media are our most important sources of information on current affairs and, therefore, take up a central role in how people perceive and assess the world around them (Dearing & Rogers 1996). These general ideas about media and their role within society lead us to an important issue that will be developed throughout this contribution. Following Gaunt (1990, p. 3), insofar as the information received from media shapes our view of the world, it is crucial to understand and study these processes. The processes under investigation in this article thus deal with the central question of how news media construct (foreign) disasters, in particular with regard to the Flemish news context. Which factors are important for journalists in deciding to *select* an event? And if selected, *how* is distant suffering then represented? In a final part, we also briefly reflect on the wider social role that media can take on during and in the aftermath of a disaster.

Defining a disaster: a problematic issue

Before we turn to these various aspects of the complex but intriguing relationship between disasters and the news media, it is vital to flesh out our understanding of this article's key concept; that is disasters. Most scholars refer to the traditional definition of a disaster by Fritz (1961, p. 655) who characterized it as "an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society or a relative self-sufficient subdivision of society undergoes severe damage and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted, and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of society prevented." Although still

frequently cited, this is, however, a too broad conceptualization of a disaster. Other scholars have further scrutinized and refined the concept of a disaster. Guha-Sapir, Hargitt and Hoyois (2004) for instance stress the necessity of international recognition of the event, by governments as well as non-governmental organizations and the media (cf. the notion of disaster as a media construction), which could result in relief aid and humanitarian assistance. They define a disaster as a "[s]ituation or event, which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to national or international level for external assistance, or is recognized as such by a multilateral agency or by at least two sources, such as national, regional or international assistance groups and the media" (Guha-Sapir et al. 2004, p. 16).

Drawing on these definitions, we need to make some additional differentiations based on the work by Benthall (1993) and Wei, Zhao and Liang (2009). First, there is a difference between sudden or unpredictable events (e.g. airplane crash, earthquake,…) and more structural long-term crisis situations which develop gradually over time (e.g. a famine following a drought). Secondly, they distinguish between natural disasters and technological or man-made disasters, which is, in our opinion, a more problematic categorization as it is extremely difficult to keep man outside of the equation in the event of a natural disaster. Human intervention might not be the main or 'original' cause of these emergency situations or men might not have had the intention to deliberately cause pain and suffering, it is a nevertheless a factor to take into account. Consequently, scholars such as Cottle urge to define natural disasters as "unnatural phenomena" and "unintended consequences of late modernity, with its rapacious pursuit of economic growth and production of unintended environmental risks" (Cottle 2009, p. 43). Let us briefly illustrate this discussion with a simple example. An earthquake is a physical phenomenon with a number of natural consequences. The severity of the event as measured by the Richter scale is directly related to its impact, but it is particularly the resulting human cost and material damage that will define it as a disaster. However, the latter two are mainly affected by human factors such as the effects of urbanization, soil erosion due to too intensive agriculture, overpopulation, unstable construction work, … The earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010 is a perfect illustration of how various policy decisions taken by humans have, unintentionally, magnified the impact of the natural event (Joye 2010a). An often quoted statement in this respect, is the following one by the 1998 winner of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, Amartya Sen, when referring to the famine in Ethiopia: "that he [an Ethiopian farmer] was hit by drought, and decimated by market mechanisms" (Sen cited in Belloni et al. 2000, p. 11).

Accordingly, almost all of these definitions - scholarly as well as popularized - of a disaster are to be criticized for neglecting the underlying political, historical and economic mechanisms (Ayish 1991; van Ginneken 1996) and hence for being a-political in a sense that they look at disasters as "simply unavoidable extreme physical events that require purely technocratic solutions" (Bankoff 2001, p. 25). In other words, academic and popular discourse on disasters generally tend to naturalize or de-politicize these events and portray them as "acts of God" (in the case of a natural disaster) or as purely technological flaws (in the case of a technological disaster) that fall beyond human's responsibility and control. This dominant view creates a flow of de-contextualized and ahistorical interpretations, as eloquently formulated by Ploughman (1995, p. 320): "'Constructing' a disaster as 'natural' or as an 'act of God' is cognitively consistent,

provides solace, emphasizes the value of social order, and relieves guilt. 'Constructing' a disaster as precipitated by human acts or omissions provokes dissonance, blame attribution, and guilt."

A final remark regarding the definition of a disaster concerns the stress that many scholars put on the social dimension of a disaster which manifests itself mainly in its human cost but also in the way affected communities handle a disaster and its aftermath. Belloni, Douma, Hilhorst, Holla and Kuiper (2000, p. 11) and van der Velden and van Middendorp (2008, p. 101), for instance, refer to the societal impact of disasters, emphasizing the idea that it is a collectively experienced event or, in the words of Britton (1986, p. 254) and Ledesma (1994, pp. 73-82), "a social product." Embodying this social dimension the best, is the broader yet related concept of suffering. Kleinman, Das and Lock (1997, p. xi) define suffering as "an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience", including political, social, institutional and economic conditions that involve health, welfare, legal, moral and religious issues. Suffering is thereby not only perceived as the collective experience of pain, loss or psychological distress (Steeves & Kahn 1987) but also includes individual forms of suffering and manners of coping with it. Forms of social suffering do evoke individual lives and personal accounts, but embed these in the broader social context (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997, p. xxvii). In this contribution, we will interchangeably refer to disasters and suffering, as both concepts focus on acts of misfortune that are inflicted upon (a collectivity of) people. The causes or the events of suffering are situated outside of the human control or will of the sufferer (Joye 2013). Furthermore, given the emphasis of the paper on the relation between media and suffering, we will focus on a particular type of suffering, that is distant suffering. Drawing on the work of Boltanski (1999), we hereby refer to the suffering of distant others that is presented through the media. It thus implies moral and political issues for the spectator who cannot act directly to affect the circumstances in which the suffering takes place. It is to this key relation between media and suffering that we now turn.

2. The media construction of disasters

As hinted at above, most Western spectators only receive information on disasters through the news media. For them, this mediated and thus indirect exposure to suffering is their most common experience of suffering, death and grief following a disaster (Kitch & Hume 2007). Analyzing US media coverage of foreign disasters, Van Belle (2000, pp. 50-51) found that nearly 75 per cent of the survey respondents relied on mass media for disaster information, as they have no direct experience with natural or technological disasters. But even for people who do are a direct witness or who find themselves in the middle of a disaster situation, media play a very decisive role. Due to the intense and personally experienced emotions, Griffin, Yang, ter Huurne, Boerner, Ortiz and Dunwoody (2008) asserted that these persons display a far more active information seeking and processing behavior. In both cases, we can fairly speak of a situation of media dependency in the event of a disaster. According to Graber (2005), this also applies to public and non-governmental authorities. In his view, news media are - in the event of a disaster - the only institutions that are capable of gathering and disseminating a substantial amount of information in a short time frame. This echoes Beck's claim that "[i]n late modern societies, knowledge of […] risk and uncertainty have become central to most or all social, economic and technological arrangements" (Beck 1992 cited in Livingstone 2007, p. 302).

This role of news media as the central and often only source of information in disaster situations leads us to the key notion of disasters as media constructions. In this article, we follow Benthall (1993), Ploughman (1995), Franks (2006; 2008), Blakely (2005) and Cottle (2009) in their conceptualization of disasters which is inspired by the social constructivism paradigm of thought. It refers to the main idea that disasters exist only - in a sense of bearing meaning in a social context - when recognized and (discursively) constructed by the media. Franks (2008, p. 27), for one, states that "[d]isasters […] exist only when they are covered by the media. Plenty of terrible things happen that remain unreported. Most disasters are known about only by those directly affected". Benthall (1993) and Franks (2006; 2008) further point towards the selective and arbitrary nature of this media construction, as the overall majority of international disasters are not selected by the media and are thus "a reality restricted to a local circle of victims" (Benthall 1993, p. 11). Therefore, Fry (2003, p. 84) identifies journalists and news organizations as vital cultural agents, "authorized to shape, interpret, and present certain events and phenomena" such as disasters.

The construction of disasters by news media largely determines "how we collectively recognize and respond to these different threats to humanity" (Cottle 2009, p. 1). In this respect, Wijfjes (2002, p. 5) refers to a broader social process of "disaster inflation" that denotes a loss of the rational-critical distance in the event of a crisis whereby disasters appear to be more severe regarding their (immediate) impact and are perceived to have larger political and social implications. Disaster inflation has emerged since the 1990s and is mainly induced by the increasing (news) media coverage of disasters, in particular the enormous amount of available footage after a disaster. The latter has been amplified by digital media and user-generated content such as eyewitness videos on YouTube or other social media networks. In general, the ubiquitous media representations of disasters and suffering have led people to believe that they are subjected to more risk today and that risk and danger have increasingly become part of the social realm of their everyday life (Altheide 2002, pp. 26-27).

In order to further develop our understanding of disasters as a media construction, we will, first, discuss the news selection process and the news values that dictate this process. According to Spencer and Triche (1994, p. 201) the media construction of a disaster event partly depends on its newsworthiness. Given their nature of an exceptional and widespread threat to human life, health or subsistence, disasters generally fit the universal standards of a newsworthy story. Secondly, we will look into the way that distant suffering is represented by Western news media as the media construction not only deals with the question of whether or not a disaster will be picked up and recognized by the news media but also with the issue of portrayal or representation. In both stages of the news production process - selection and representation - we encounter biases that are articulations or manifestations of the media construction of disasters. In this article, bias or selective inaccuracy refers to a "selectivity in news reporting, which may or may not lead to the unbalanced, inequitable, or unfair treatment of individuals or issues" (Gunter 1997, p. 16). Biases are inherent in the definition of news as a process that "shapes events into stories by distorting, however, and by emphasizing certain points over others" (Altheide 1976, p. 97). Although we acknowledge that news selection is inevitable, this contribution urges us to

remain critical about the selection and coverage of disaster events, the potential biases that occur in these processes, and their widespread societal implications.

3. News selection: a hierarchy of death?

A first indication of how disasters are 'constructed' by news media can be found in the rich body of literature on news selection. There are a number of factors and values that scholars refer to when discussing the selection of disasters by journalists.

A rich strand of research has explored the determinants of international news coverage (Galtung & Ruge 1965; Harcup 2004; Brighton & Foy 2007). Recently, Golan (2008, pp. 44-45) identified "four key variables that are consistently found to predict international news coverage. These include deviance (Shoemaker et al. 1986), relevance (Chang et al. 1987), cultural affinity (Hester 1973) and the prominence of the nation within the hierarchy of nations (Chang 1998; Kim and Barnett 1996)." Focusing on disasters, Gans (1979) points to the unexpectedness, spectacular value and especially the severity or magnitude of the events as key reasons to select them. In similar studies of print and television news coverage of earthquakes, Gaddy and Tanjong (1986) as well as Simon (1997) observed a strong relationship between the amount of coverage and the number of people killed. However, as other research has proven, this does not simply mean that news media devote most attention to disasters with the highest number of victims. Adams (1986), for instance, found that there was only a minor correlation between severity of the disaster (number of deaths) and amount of coverage. Other factors such as the cultural and geographic distance or proximity of the foreign event to the home country appear to have a more substantial impact on the amount of coverage that the disaster receives (Van Belle 2000). In this contribution, we refer to proximity as a meta-concept to indicate a number of (inter)related factors such as cultural affinity, historical links, geographical distance, trade or economic relations, as well as psychological or emotional distance. All these factors express a certain relationship of involvement between the (Western) spectator and the (distant) sufferer or region affected by the emergency. This involvement can take many forms, but scholars have identified the presence of Western victims and Western (economic) self-interest as the most important predictors for an international disaster's newsworthiness (Adams 1986; CARMA International 2006; Kim & Lee 2008). Related to this are findings from previous research that have demonstrated the often nationalistic and ethnocentric nature of international and foreign news coverage (Kamalipour 2002; Kim & Lee 2008). A review of the literature further identified important factors such as the geopolitical, economic and military importance of the affected region (Benthall 1993; Singer & Endreny 1993; Teunissen 2005).

Related to these news selection criteria, Cottle (2009, p. 47) refers to a "calculus of death" that has "become institutionalized and normalized in the professional judgments, practices and news values of the western media, a calculus based on crude body counts and thresholds as well as proximities of geography, culture and economics." In its most extreme form, such a calculus results in statistical scales or equations like the so-called "Law of kilometric death" or "McLurg's Law" declaring that "one European is worth 28 Chinese, or perhaps 2 Welsh miners worth one thousand Pakistanis" (Schlesinger quoted in Brighton & Foy 2007, p. 34) and other comparative values of death (cf. Adams 1986; Hanusch 2008). Another illustration of such hierarchical biases

in the process of news selection of human suffering can be found in the New Internationalist (2001), which published a number of revealing statistics: on September 11, 2001 nearly 3,000 people died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (New York). That same day approximately 2,400 people died of hunger while 6,020 children were killed by diarrhea and another 2,700 by measles. The suffering of those 11,120 people remained invisible to the world and was qualified as not being newsworthy enough. The fact that some stories of suffering are told and some are not is, according to Pantti (2009, p. 88), "[t]he crudest form of the [media] construction of a hierarchy between worthy and unworthy victims."

To briefly sum up for this section on news values and selection, the reviewed international literature hints at an inevitable degree of selective inaccuracy in the news coverage of disasters that is mainly driven by the news factors of proximity and severity. Many crises are even completely forgotten on the grounds of lacking political priority, newsworthiness or the fact that they have been continuing for many years. Related to the latter is the time it sometimes takes the media to 'discover' certain disasters such as droughts and famines (Gaddy & Tanjong 1986, p. 110). Cottle (2009, p. 173) defines these so-called silent emergencies as humanitarian crises that fail "to attract the news media spotlight, public recognition and political response." Silent emergencies are particularly exemplary for the notion of media construction of disasters as they demonstrate that "journalistic meaning is communicated as much by absence as by presence; as much by what is 'missing' or excluded as by what is remembered and present" (Richardson 2007, p. 93). Additionally, these instances of selective inaccuracy have potentially widespread implications. For instance, it is no coincidence that the neglected or forgotten disasters are also the ones that consistently suffer low levels of humanitarian funding and charity donations (Oxfam International 2005, p. 5) given the failure to command wider recognition. Media attention has been identified as a necessary condition to mobilize (material and financial) aid and relief assistance (Benthall 1993) (cf. infra). Eisensee and Strömberg (2007, pp. 723-724) further warn for a relief bias, caused by the higher news value of Western disasters which "induces extra U.S. relief to victims in Europe and on the American continent, at the expense of victims elsewhere", predominantly of victims in less newsworthy regions of Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The Flemish case

In a previous study (Joye 2010c), we have demonstrated a similar pattern of these general statements for the news selection process within the Flemish context. The study followed Rosengren (1970; 1974) in his criticism that research on news selection would benefit from what he referred to as extra-media data or data gathered from outside and independent of news media such as official documents and databases. Only then, as Rosengren argues, is it possible to reflect on differences between (an objective determination of) 'reality' and its mediated representation. Focusing on disasters, Ploughman (1995, p. 308) underwrites this premise by stating that "[o]bjective scientific knowledge of disasters often differs greatly in content, emphasis, and detail from the news media's interpretation and presentation of disasters." Therefore, we introduce extra-media data into the research design as "an appropriate basis of comparison and an objective determination of reality" (Gaddy & Tanjong 1986, p. 105). We made use of extra-media data provided by the international emergency events database EM-DAT (hosted by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED)) and intra-media data that was derived from

a quantitative content analysis of four Flemish newspapers (De Morgen, De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws, and Het Nieuwsblad), both spanning a time period of 1986 to 2006.

By comparing the media data to data from the independent database, the study revealed that 70.8 per cent of all disasters occurring between 1986 and 2006 are neglected by the newspapers, for the large part disasters in less developed and non-western countries. Over a period of twenty years, less than one out of three disasters was selected, with a decreasing tendency since 1991. The selection of disasters appeared to display a geographic bias regarding the affected country. Journalists prefer to select disasters that affect their own country or other neighboring European and Western countries, hence articulating the dominant value of proximity. Half of all editorial space in the Flemish newspapers was devoted to European disasters while these only represent eleven per cent of the total number of disasters and eight out of ten disasters take place in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The distant crises in the peripheral and disaster-prone South thus struggle for media attention unless they affect a huge number of (western) people. In the second place, the severity or magnitude of a disaster plays a role in the news selection process. Leaving the dominant factor of proximity out of consideration, disasters with a smaller number of affected persons are less represented in the news output as journalists clearly prefer more severe emergencies. Third, we noticed a small bias in terms of the type of disaster. Transport accidents (land, water and air) and floods accounted for nearly half of all reported emergency situations in the newspapers. Remarkably, less spectacular or less frequent types of disasters, such as droughts and landslides, are to be categorized as forgotten or silent disasters. Finally, there were some indications that the duration of a disaster also played a role in the selection process. The majority of disasters that developed over a longer period of time, such as droughts, insect plagues and famines, were overlooked in the news output.

At first sight, the findings of this study for the Flemish news media imply a rather distorted worldview that is characterized by a Eurocentric perspective fuelled by the two key news factors of proximity and severity of the disaster. However, in a second phase of the research project, journalists of various Flemish news media (newspapers, television, radio, websites and news agencies) were confronted with these results from the quantitative content analysis. During these interviews, they qualified the outcome of the study by giving more insight in their daily practices and routines, hence identifying a number of contextual factors that also determine the process of news selection. For instance, all journalists refer to their personal interests and the "hunch" of the journalist as a decisive factor. They point to a specific feeling that is difficult to explain or describe, but that is best paraphrased as the journalist's "gut feeling" of knowing what is news and what is not. Secondly, for all journalists - even from the written press and radio journalists - the availability of footage is another important factor. This relates to a broader element of source dependency as Flemish journalists - particularly those reporting on international affairs and disasters - need to rely on the input or selection of footage and information provided to them by a small number of foreign news agencies. Other criteria mentioned concern the available space in the newspaper or time in the television broadcast (e.g. important domestic events have priority over foreign events, hence allowing only a limited selection of the latter); the format of the medium (e.g. need for sound bites, time of deadline, …); the number of staff; the budget to travel and to cover disasters on site; and the overall editorial policy of the news media outlet they work for, often inspired by the fact of being a commercial

enterprise or a public funded media organization. These more organizational as well as individual criteria or factors are generally overlooked in academic research on news selection, despite their central role in the journalist's decision to select a disaster or not.

Naturally, these various identified news criteria have relevance in the next stage of the news production process too as the seminal study by Galtung and Ruge (1965) indicated that journalists have a tendency to emphasize in their news reports the event's characteristics that determined its selection in the first place. Of course, other elements are to be considered when reflecting on the news representation of disasters.

4. News representation: a hierarchy of suffering?

According to Nederveen Pieterse (1990, p. 234), one of the main characteristics of the representation of distant suffering is that it is part of the production and reproduction of global social inequality. Discourse-analytical research by Chouliaraki (2006) and Joye (2009; 2010b) confirms this as they argue that the (television news) representation reflects and consolidates the unequal economic and political power relations and divisions of our world. In their view, Western news media discursively reproduce hierarchies of place and human life. They refer to the power of media to classify the world into categories of 'us' and 'the Other' and orientate (or not) the Western spectator towards the cultural or ethnic other in need. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, the latter is mainly located in developing countries. Belloni, Douma, Hilhorst, Holla and Kuiper (2000) have shown that more than 90 per cent of all disasters occur in the Third World. In Western media imagery, Third World people are generally portrayed as the exotic 'Other', most typically characterized in terms of helplessness, negativity and as inferior to 'us' (Benthall 1993; Chiang & Duann 2007). The Western press has always been charged with constructing such a reductive ideological contrast between us and them (Lee et al. 2002). These representations are often rooted in colonial history or are ideologically driven which adds on to the already incomplete and stereotypical portrayal of the cultural or ethnic other. The use of such pre-established images and stereotypes resonates with the Orientalist (cf. Saïd 1987) discourse of civilized 'West' (the in-group, identified as superior) versus barbarian 'Other' (the non-Western out-group, categorized as inferior). In news reporting on distant suffering, Benthall (1993) has explicitly pointed towards the following classic contradiction: on the one hand, the helpless and passive (foreign) victim and on the other hand, the heroic and active Western relief aid worker. Furthermore, Bankoff (2001, p. 27, original italics) argues that disasters are part of "a much wider historical and cultural geography of risk that both creates and maintains a particular depiction of large parts of the world (mainly non-western countries) as dangerous places for *us* and *ours*." In other words, we can detect a (geographical, cultural and/or economic) bias in terms of a hierarchy of global suffering in (Western) news on disasters that thrives on the dominant factor of proximity. This idea "that hierarchies of place and human life are reproduced in Western news is not new in social research" (Chouliaraki 2006, p. 8) and has been the subject of research from different traditions, including studies on disaster news coverage.

The academic literature further refers to a wide set of visual, textual and verbal linguistic modes of representation in which the above mentioned hierarchy of suffering manifests itself. Here, we are able to identify a second cluster of biases or distortions in the news production

process. Once a disaster is selected, journalists frequently make use of simplified images, dramatic visuals and stereotypes (Moeller 1999). In an inclusive effort, Joye (2010a) has listed a set of elements that characterizes typical Western disaster coverage. It would lead us to far to go into detail on each element, but we can refer to the following: the use of graphic images such as close-ups of starving African children; a strong focus on negative events; a dominance of 'ideal victims' such as children, elderly and (pregnant) women in the news coverage in order to establish an emotional rapport with the audience (cf. the notion of a "hierarchy of innocence" as coined by Moeller 2002, pp. 48-49); applying mythical narratives or iconic images that are related to the Christian Catholic imaginary such as the pieta; a neglect of the local inhabitants and victims in favor of (Western) elite such as members of the royal family, celebrities, politicians, … who are visiting the area of disaster; references to 'miraculous' savings to provide the reader or viewer with some positive story or element of hope; spectacular images of the forces of nature; and a high degree of de-contextualization in the news coverage. The latter is related to the old saying that (news) media do not cover issues, they cover events. This stems from a general belief or feeling that the cause, context and background story of a disaster is too complex to report in the few words or within the limited time frame that the mainstream news format grants its journalists. Disasters are therefore categorized as event-oriented news, which implies this kind of de-contextualization and lack of causal explanations (Ploughman 1995, p. 319), echoing the discussion on the definition or identification of a disaster as a dehumanized 'act of God' or as an event in which the human factor needs to be acknowledged (cf. supra 'Introduction'). Our own research (Joye 2010c) for Flemish newspapers confirms this as the majority of emergencies (63 per cent) are only reported on once, indicating that disaster coverage is very brief and focused on the event itself, with little or no attention paid to the aftermath and long-term consequences. The study also confirms that news coverage of disasters tends to focus on the dramatic event itself, with attention to cause and aftermath scarce. It appears that newspapers have a brief attention span, particularly regarding emergencies in developing nations.

In recent years, the tradition of research on news representation of disasters and suffering has (theoretically) developed itself rapidly, particularly following the publication of the seminal work by Chouliaraki (2006). Applying critical discourse analysis, she drew up a model of analyzing representations of distant suffering by identifying three regimes of pity and three corresponding discourses of news, involving different degrees of moral and emotional involvement by the spectator: adventure news, emergency news and ecstatic news. Chouliaraki (2006, p. 98) refers to adventure news as "adventuristic reports on irrelevant misfortune." The distant other is thereby presented as no cause for concern or action, thus blocking any engagement or feelings of compassion. The second regime of emergency news concerns news that produces pity in its representation of suffering as well as the option for action on distant misfortune. The spectator can now identify with the remote sufferer who is still a (cultural) other. In the case of ecstatic news, we feel for and think of the sufferer as our own, as someone who is like us. There is a relationship of reflexive identification as the spectators share with the sufferers the same humanity and threat. Examples of ecstatic news are 9/11, the 2004 tsunami and the SARS pandemic. Regarding the latter, a previous study (Joye 2010b) demonstrated that proximity played a substantial role in the representation strategies applied by the television broadcasters as it determined the category of news discourse and, hence, the mediated regime of pity. A high degree of proximity induces identification, feelings of compassion and of course

substantial media attention. The impact of an increased proximity was best illustrated when potential SARS cases were reported in Belgium. During these three days of ecstatic news, the dominant hierarchy of the 'safe' (Western) center and the 'dangerous' periphery was reversed. For a brief moment in time and space, the spectator and the sufferer coincided. During the other, less mediatized, phases of the news cycle, VRT and VTM continued to cover SARS from a principally Euro- and ethnocentric perspective. Henceforth, the findings supported the claim that Western news media discursively reproduce a certain kind of world order, mainly a Euro-American-centered one. The Flemish news coverage of international crises, such as SARS, constructs and maintains the socio-cultural difference between 'us' and 'them' as well as articulating discourses of global power structures and a division of the world in zones of poverty and prosperity, danger and safety. The cause and logical consequence of this is the key role of proximity in news discourses on distant events.

To conclude this section, a brief word on the increasingly applied journalistic practice of domestication which is related to the above discussed notion of proximity and the practices of representation. We need to look at proximity as a broad concept, incorporating various relations of involvement. Domestication generally refers to the framing of a foreign news events within the national or local context of the audience (Clausen 2004). According to Gurevitch, Levy and Roeh (1991), domesticating international events makes them comprehensible, appealing and more relevant to domestic audiences. Therefore, the concept of domestication perfectly links in with the strand of research on disaster reporting. Supporting this claim is the well-researched idea that if global suffering is presented by the news media as close and relevant, we will care for this distant sufferer (Chouliaraki 2006). When journalists decide to domesticate a foreign disaster and hence render this distant suffering relevant and appealing to their domestic audiences, this has important (potential) implications. It determines whether or not a disaster will raise feelings of pity or even compassion which on its turn can result in helping behavior such as donating money, supporting fundraising initiatives or organizing a philanthropic event. This relates to the social role that media can take on in times of disasters which is the topic of our last section.

5. The social role of media in reporting on disasters

While most scholars focus on the traditional informative role of news media, an emergent strand of research occupies itself with the important social role that media can play in the aftermath of a disaster. In this respect, Perez-Lugo (2004, p. 219) refers to the therapeutic function of media during a crisis situation given that "the media-audience relationship [is] motivated more by the people's need for emotional support, companionship, and community ties, than for their need for official information." Other scholars such as Wayment (2004), Kitch and Hume (2007), and Pantti and Sumiala (2009) all underline the vital role of media as a public forum for collective acts of mourning that draw on a sense of (national) unity and community, solidarity and identification. News media provide support and condolences to affected people as well as to the broader community. There is a socially shared need to talk and memorialize death and grief (Armstrong 2012, p. 19). Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012, p. 61) emphasize the wide range of emotions that are related to events of human suffering and which we all experience through media representations: "we bear witness to the shock, grief, fear and anger of the victims

of disasters. It is also through processes of media representations that individual experiences and emotions become collective and political."

However, the most common (social) outcome of disaster reporting relates to a "'mediated ethics of care', an invitation [inscribed in media] to recognize, better understand and care about the plight of others" (Cottle 2009, p. 93). "[P]erceiving the suffering and needs of distant others through media images and reports" (Höijer 2004, p. 514) triggers compassion which is defined as both an affective and cognitive reaction. On an individual level, media coverage of human suffering can evoke compassion, which possibly leads to donating money or any other helping behavior (Simon 1997, p. 82). In addition, Olsen, Carstensen and Hoyen (2003) and Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) argue that media coverage is an important element in determining the level of emergency assistance that humanitarian crises attract. Other factors are the geopolitical importance of the affected country or region and the presence of humanitarian organizations.

6. Conclusion

A basic assumption of this contribution was the notion of news as a selective construction of reality. In a context of disasters and distant suffering, this is reinforced by the fact that news media are important and often the only sources of information. However, we need to acknowledge the arbitrary and selective nature of news reporting on foreign disasters. Research has demonstrated a number of biases that manifest themselves in different stages of the news production process, particularly in terms of selection and representation. Accordingly, it is fair to state that disasters are media constructions; disasters exist only when recognized and given meaning by the media.

Although underwriting the key idea of news as a selective construction of reality, this contribution also calls for a more qualified conceptualization in a sense that the selective nature of news is not to be confused with deliberately or intentionally selective acts on behalf of the journalists as this would suggest or imply practices of conspiracy and manipulation (Hartley 1989, pp. 61-62). In contrast, we can identify a number of elements that (largely) explain the biased outcome of the news process. First of all, the dominant news factor of proximity is very determining in terms of selection and representation. Second, journalists themselves refer to a broad set of contextual elements that shape the news output. When studying the news coverage of disasters, there are organizational, professional and socio-cultural elements that need to be taken into account. On a related note, scholars and other critics have indeed an obligation to be a watchdog and to point towards these biases and distortions in the news coverage as they have significant social implications. However, this does not entail to scapegoat individual journalists or to accuse them of deliberately distorting the reality of disasters and other events of human suffering. Instead, we need to criticize the broader constellation in which the journalists operate and work as it is on these organizational, professional and socio-cultural levels where practices of (political, economic, ideological, …) power are shaping the kind of news coverage alongside reinforcing the existing international power imbalances and hierarchies. Of course, journalists are no slaves to the context. They are independent agents and, henceforth, need to assume their democratic role and take up their (social) responsibility in reporting on distant suffering.

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